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ABSTRACT

Student unions of the 80's struggled to try to find the proper balance between service and education while meeting financial requirements as institutional support began to ebb. Upgrading food service, serving alcoholic beverages, and offering packaged events and mini-courses were all used to serve the needs of the student population as well as bolster revenue. As budgets tightened, university administrators were directing college unions to pay their own way. Unions began accepting corporate support to survive and contracting became popular, but financial burdens were still high. Private businesses are raising unfair competition issues and asking for closer scrutiny of college union enterprises by the Federal government. Today, many private sector contractors are operating union services. Today's college unions are facing some major problems, among them are space shortages and a loss of mission. The pendulum has swung in favor of financial and operational goals and away from being a unifying force in building a campus community. In the '90s, college unions must reaffirm their legitimacy as an integral part of higher education. (GLR)

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Here's looking at you

The decade reviewed

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Richard D. Blackburn

Those who endured the '70s on college campuses welcomed the '80s with delight and optimism. The senseless violence that had wracked higher education disappeared. There were still important societal issues—the draft, energy, South Africa, Cambodia, the nuclear threat—but there were rational attempts at resolution.

While students in the early '80s questioned and demanded more than their predecessors, they were also more sophisticated, polite, and understanding. Indeed, they had more fun.

The college union appeared healthier. Constructive student leaders emerged, though their interest lay chiefly in program not policy. More individual professors served on committees and participated in programs. Organizational introspection gained popularity: self-studies and management audits became common.

But institutional support for unions began to ebb. Union directors encountered increased costs, such as employee benefits, utilities, and a vaguely defined "general overhead." Staff reductions effected overworked survivors; "burnout" became a familiar administrative word. As the fiscal screws tightened, the quest for new income intensified.

Food service, typically a barometer of the union's fiscal and overall health, did quite well, thanks to improved promotions and successful attempts to link union food service with programming. In addition, food presentation changed as unions specialized or removed cafeteria lines. Arizona State, for example, opened an innovative "Grand Marketplace," featuring separate serving stations. A major renovation at Purdue produced a "Union Market," housing several food shops in a spacious serving area. Students flocked to make-your-own salad bars, delis, and natural food counters.

Students were a prime source of labor. The Wisconsin Union employed 1,200 students, for example, while Ohio State reported that 90 percent of its employees (65 percent of all work hours) were students on work-study. Attempts to develop a student labor union movement failed.

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More unions began to serve alcoholic beverages during the '70s. And many budgets depended upon this income. But union administrators worried that alcohol had become a collegiate drug. Directors felt pressured to generate more income; yet as educators they knew the dangers of overindulgence. (ACU-I faced a similar dilemma: As the number of alcohol education programs increased at the Association's annual conferences, beer companies still distributed free "samples" in the exhibit hall.) Beer company commercialism had discovered college campuses.

In 1980, "computer" was a foreign word to college unions. A few progressive unions purchased food ordering and production software, and some computerized their ticket office. Some unions even computerized the payroll. Computerized energy control systems were not suited to unions because of fluctuating operation hours, and room assignment technology had not yet arrived. Many campuses, meanwhile, stumbled over institutional policies insisting all on-campus hardware tie into the university computer system. Microcomputers appeared on the horizon, but campus bureaucracies had trouble coping with the rapidly changing technology.

Programming in the '80s emphasized packaged events—concerts, films, speakers. Big concerts, however, became risky financial ventures and some union administrators prophesied—and likely wished—their demise.

"All-niters," dinner theaters, and madrigals were popular. Disco was out. Nostalgia was in. Traditional events (even homecoming) reappeared. And the Greeks returned after a decade hiatus. Mini-courses boomed as students wanted to learn how to dance, cook, repair autos and bikes, tend bar, and "taste" wine. Campuses swarmed with joggers as health and wellness programs and recreational sports exploded on campus. Inside the union, directors proudly displayed electronic message systems, *the* new fad. Once-empty walls fed the passerby a continuous stream of information and news headlines—and the odd commercial.

Faced with rising operating costs and unsteady university financial support, college unions were on the lookout for alternative income. For many, electronic video games and automatic bank tellers rode to the rescue.

By the mid-'80s, college unions faced a tough but hardly new challenge: Maintain the proper balance between service and education. Union directors had to solve mounting financial problems while losing institutional support. University administrators had subordinated the college union: The "auxiliaries" had to "pay their own way."

As union directors tightened fiscal belts another notch, they chose to emphasize self-help. As a result, an aura of commercialization enveloped the union. Many campuses softened

Photos by J.D. Scott

commercial advertising and solicitation policies. Unions accepted more corporate support. From the private sector came charges of unfair competition. Arizona formed a private enterprise review board to handle private business complaints against state agencies, including colleges and universities. Other states followed Arizona's lead.

Partly in response to unfair competition charges, colleges and universities invited private enterprise into the union. Contracting gained momentum, especially with food service operations; many college union food services had experienced sluggish fiscal returns. Even when gross incomes improved, unions suffered from rising food and labor costs as well as uncontrollable institutional administrative charges. So college unions began to house fast-food franchises. Sometimes several franchises would form a fast-food court with a common seating area.

As more states approved unfair competition legislation, however, federal lawmakers began to review tax-exempt organizations' income-producing activities. Contracting would not solve all the unions' problems.

The union interior began to change. Union bowling lanes closed. But copy centers opened (usually in leased space) and became important revenue sources. Automatic teller bank machines became standard fixtures, sometimes providing large incomes. Special programs to encourage union alumni contributions found success at Wisconsin and Indiana.

Video-mania swept the country. Traditional film programs struggled as videos and VCRs burst on the scene. Although federal copyright laws created confusion, videos were here to stay.

Midway through the '80s, most unions had experienced an information revolution. Computers were smaller, faster, and affordable. Student computer lounges popped up everywhere.

Although most states had raised the drinking age to 21, alcohol abuse was prevalent on campus. Colleges increased alcohol education efforts and tightened policy enforcement. Beer companies began to back away from the college market, choosing to support the alcohol education movement. The efforts, though, had little impact on abuse problems.

Campuses were quiet. Too quiet. The student body had changed dramatically, and union staff cast an uneasy eye about them. Students wanted to get their degree and begin a career. Volunteer participation declined. Craft centers lost popularity. Comedy became the favorite form of entertainment. The big campus concert nearly disappeared. Meanwhile, prompted in part by a 1981 Supreme Court ruling, campus religious groups activity increased in the union. College union buildings, serving more people and housing more activities, felt a space crunch. Ominously, institutions did not apply money to maintain physical facilities, including unions.

Into the '90s

A new decade arrives, nipping at the heels of the old. Once a distant future, the '90s has emerged from the shadows. The union, as always, must reflect an ever changing world.

Enrollment at two-year community and technical colleges has mushroomed, growing three times as fast as at four-year colleges and universities. Today's average student is an older minority female who attends part time and commutes.

Students have voiced strong concerns. Organized protests, while orderly, are frequent—especially as education costs have risen. (Tuition and fee increases outpaced inflation throughout the decade.) Despite specialized financing plans, colleges may become a student luxury.

Photo by Dave Umberger, Purdue News Service

Students have narrowed their focus: Get good grades, find a job, and plan a career. Sometimes this focus seems antithetic to volunteerism, especially long-term campus student leadership involvement. Some campuses, however, report a resurgence in student community volunteer service, as more students help the homeless and the hungry.

Some old issues resurfaced with renewed commitment. Twenty years after the first Earth Day, students again worry that the planet will not replenish itself indefinitely. The Associated Students of UCLA, for example, launched a major recycling program. UCLA now sells drinks in plastic or ceramic containers, which students may reuse to buy drinks at discounted prices; provides paper napkins and paper salad bowls made from recycled paper; and uses styrofoam cups not produced with CFCs. Stanford, meanwhile, has considered eliminating paper service, returning to china. The Michigan unions recycle most beverage cans and bottles and more than one ton cardboard a month. Many state lawmakers have pushed to use biodegradable or recyclable containers.

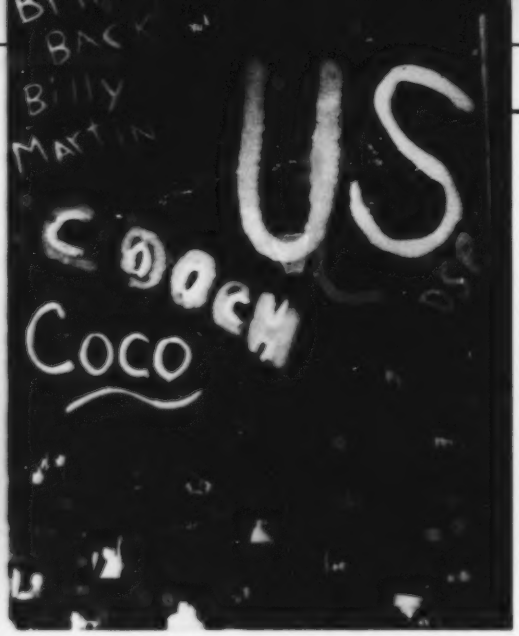
The '80s ended amid declining minority participation in higher education. While colleges struggled with multicultural issues, overt racism again reared its ugly head. Colleges have accelerated efforts to build diverse staffs and programs, while debating whether to build separate minority centers. To further

Photo by Indiana Memorial Union

Bottom: *Buried amid their work, '80s students narrowed their focus: Get good grades and find a job.*

Top: *Today's typical student is an older minority female, like this Purdue woman.*

Photo by Dave Umberger, Purdue News Service



***Left:** Keep your ears open. Today's students will seek out college union professionals for advice.*

***Right:** Like the others before them, the '90s students must voice their concerns.*

fuel the fire, at least one university's anti-harassment policy was struck down by a federal judge, who cited First Amendment free speech rights. The '80s experienced little real progress; the campus racial climate remains tense.

Ten years ago, unions saw alcohol as little more than a lucrative revenue source in the pub. That has changed. Alcohol awareness became a dominant campus issue; colleges still search for alcohol education programs that make a difference. College administrators began to discourage beverage company commercialism, though the money invited hypocrisy. Unions have given up high-pressure alcohol marketing. Beer is no longer a principal union revenue source. Stricter rules and stronger enforcement of on-campus and state drinking age laws may help change behaviors.

More colleges have successfully promoted on-campus alternatives to booze. Non-alcoholic clubs, emphasizing music, dancing, and socializing, have slowly gained acceptance (especially on smaller campuses).

Awareness initiatives have improved the overall atmosphere, but has any college significantly reduced alcohol abuse among college students? Alcohol continues to precipitate student misconduct, with Greek organizations frequently at fault. According to a recent study, 80 percent of campus crime incidents are alcohol-connected. A sobering report from one union noted that Moms and Dads Weekends were the year's heaviest drinking weekends.

Substance abuse will remain a dominant issue, but other health and personal security problems have breached the ivory towers' walls: rape, abortion, sexual harassment, and AIDS. Condom-dispensing machines are now commonplace in college union restrooms. At Illinois, a satellite of the university health center dispenses free condoms in the union.

Anti-smoking policies have gained momentum. Many unions now prohibit smoking or confine it to designated locations. Some campuses may soon outlaw the sale of tobacco products.

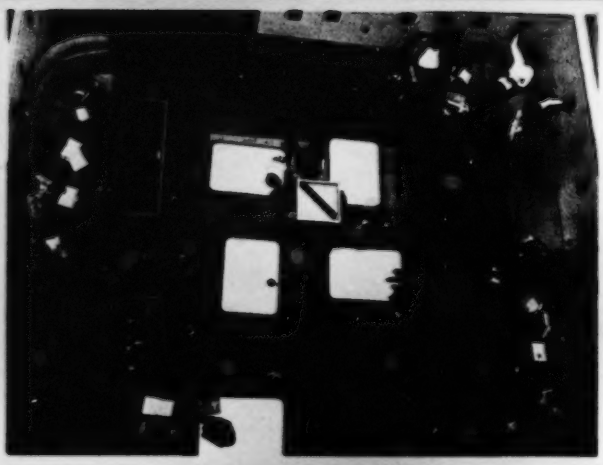
Some issues persist everywhere, like parking; others are more unique, like the Alaskan university troubled by bears on campus pathways. In Australia, while the government has forced universities (and unions) to merge, union directors also have battled a widespread political attempt to make student union membership voluntary. In Canada and Great Britain, the students have directed their attention toward reducing education costs, lobbying for government funding proposals.

"Students want to laugh," said one union director. Indeed, comedy ranks as the top campus entertainment. Big name concerts priced themselves out of the on-campus scene, though live music in small settings remains popular.

The union film program heyday may be over. Iowa State, for one, discontinued its films program. Yet other colleges still list films as their most popular program. At Oklahoma State University, the Union Activity Board involved itself in a First Amendment issue over the movie "The Last Temptation of Christ." After a student/faculty group filed suit, the university board of regents gave up delaying the film showing. Videos have dramatically affected traditional film programs, causing some to emphasize foreign films or more esoteric offerings.

Another decade has come and gone. And the college union remains a staple of student life, from the cafeteria to the billiards hall.

Photo by Robert Lansdale



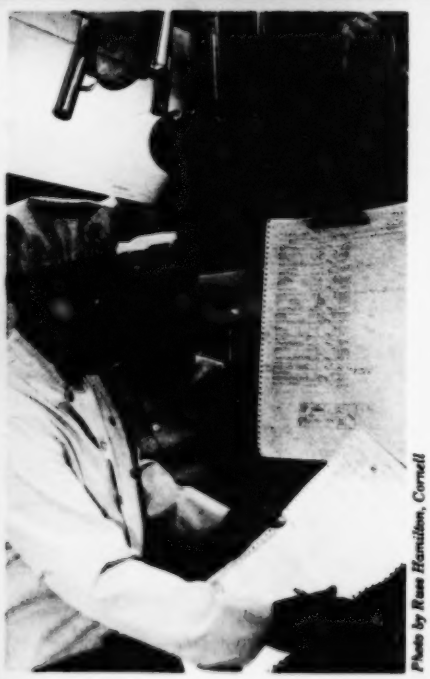


Photo by Russ Hamilton, Cornell

Photo by the Wisconsin Union

Unions in urban locations have experienced security problems at dances, as non-students and local gangs incite incidents. Now standard procedures call for uniformed officers, program staff, peer security, two-way radios, surveillance cameras, and even metal detectors.

Need a catchword for the '90s? Try "privatization"—contracting someone else for what the institution cannot or will not do. More and more institutions, for example, contract out the food service; these are hard times for college union food service operations, no matter the operator. Recently some larger universities tried combining residence hall and college union food units into one administrative structure.

Private sector contractors now operate union bookstores, travel agencies, hairstyling shops, banks, copy centers, vending, custodial services, and a potpourri of retail shops. Some university administrators thought privatization would eliminate the private sector's charges of unfair competition. No such luck.

The small business community has grown uneasy with higher education's "expanding entrepreneurial course," producing one of the overworked acronyms in higher educational business literature—UBIT (Unrelated Business Income Tax). As small businesses lobby for closer government scrutiny of university activities that generate income, more federal auditors have appeared on the union doorstep. Congress did little with UBIT in 1989, but expect more action this spring as the search for revenue continues.

The '80s technological revolution should affect the union throughout the '90s. Computers are standard equipment; computerized room reservation and accounting systems are commonplace. The newest and hottest technological sensation, especially with international students, is the FAX (facsimile transmission) machine.

Student labor shortages persist despite incentives, whether special rewards, discounts, bonuses, merit increases, or improved training programs. Demographers predict fewer (by half) people will enter the labor force in the '90s than in the '70s. On college campuses, meanwhile, corporate-style "leanness and meanness" damages employee loyalty and community.

The '90s professional union staff member embraces specialization. As a result, individuals no longer have a range of college union expertise or even a balanced perspective. Administrative responsibility is more decentralized, complicating efforts at a unified managerial approach to the union's service/education mission.

Today's college unions face several major problems. Most union professionals, however, worry most about space shortages and confused perceptions of the union mission.

Some unions have lost space as other university units expanded. Some unions must renovate as a result of untended wear, tear, and deterioration. But most unions simply need more space. More people do more things within the union. As a result, more college unions must renovate existing facilities or construct new ones.

How is today's college union perceived? Because the union has multi-dimensional roles, no one image does the union justice. As the new decade begins, however, union directors must discover what has happened to the union's traditional mission. Campus financial squeezes, reordered university structures and priorities, and philosophical differences among union staff frequently have forced unions to choose operational over educational objectives.

The traditional union mission emphasizes its contribution to the institution's educational goals; the union is a unifying force, building campus community. The pendulum has swung in favor of financial and operational goals. University administrators too often perceive union staffs primarily as service managers. They no longer understand or support the basic union educational mission. College unions must search for a solution.

The '80s allowed the union to drift from its historic mission. In the '90s, the college union must reaffirm its legitimacy as an integral part of higher education.

Higher education literature underscores the need to improve campus life. Perceptive institutions will want a strong, vibrant college union to lead the way.

Richard D. Blackburn is executive director of the Association of College Unions-International.